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THE CULTURE AND CONFLICT REVIEW



WMD Intelligence Analysis of Lessons from Iraq to Iran: *Only dot the I's – don't cross the T's*

Glen Segell, 4/1/2010

On January 29, 2010, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair gave evidence to the Iraq Enquiry in London, which was broadcast worldwide on satellite TV by the BBC. He emphasized the need to learn the lessons of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) from the case of Iraq for the case of Iran. In his words “propping up one dictator to handle another dictator is not the way, we must get rid of the dictator.” More interesting is how many intelligence analysts are being instructed to dot the I's but in the case of Iraq the analysis went to far and also crossed the T's. Here is the previously untold story of what really happened.

Blair's evidence shows that there will be many evaluations on how and why politicians made a decision to go to war in Iraq over weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This article will do so by piecing together Blair's evidence to show how defense and security decision makers erroneously relied too heavily on an open source narrative. The problem of this narrative arose because over a period of 12 years from Operation Desert Storm (1991) the press quoted politicians, generals, scientists and experts who then quoted the press who then quoted politicians, generals, scientists and experts. In doing so a narrative was constructed about Iraqi WMD that bore little resemblance to reality in 2003 on the eve of war. This was despite each fact of the narrative being accurate in its own right at the time it was first reported. The problem as will be shown in this article is that this new and exaggerated narrative emerged from the sum of many narratives creating the false impression that Iraq had WMD in 2003. This false narrative lacked a coherent or accurate time-scale. This false narrative was time-compressed giving the impression that the contents referred to a period of weeks when in fact they referred to a period of many years. Inherently any security analysis of the false narrative was doomed to be inaccurate.

Essential to evaluating this episode is separating the original narratives, the subsequent narrative that was created from these narratives and the security analysis. Essential is to understand that the open source narrative was a journalistic account of events. Any journalistic narrative may or may not contain 100 percent accurate facts given that journalism abides by a combination of sensationalism, innuendo and facts. Hence partly to blame in the creation of the false narrative was the lack of understanding or the indifference by security analysis and politicians about the process by which the press publishes stories. Journalistic accounts are often re-written by editorial teams emerging in press as combinations on a sliding scale of ensuring 100 percent accuracy or a sensational story that might contain rumors or innuendos when pandering to the demand of populace and indeed editors-in-chief. This is not unusual in journalism – it is often acceptable to do this. It is assumed that the public demand a good story to remain tuned a specific TV channel or read a specific newspaper. It is also assumed that the public accept that press reports contain rumours, innuendos and suppositions. Clichés often voiced about this are “the reconstruction of news as a story, of information in narrative style abides in the conventional wisdom of journalism” and “the global culture of 24 hours news channel with a craving populace and intense competition for advertising revenue provokes press to provide a sensational story in newsworthiness”.

It is accepted that frequently the press is not able to sustain 100 percent certainty of evidence and the story may change from day-to-day as new evidence emerges. Newspaper cannot be held responsible for publishing and inaccurate story on Monday if by Tuesday they publish another story that has

different evidence that has just come to light. Frequently the press also have a problem of holding audience attention and indeed sales over repetitive information which is not sensational. This was the case during the time-line of the story of many decades of innuendo about Iraqi WMD. During this period it is doubtful if any journalist and maybe not many of their sources actually saw any WMD themselves. Too be sure this was also a problem for the intelligence services – WMD was hearsay where there was a claim of 100 percent certainty that it existed but 0 percent certainty of where it was. Throughout this saga numerous and different journalists in unconnected newspapers, and TV and radio stations were compelled by editors, based on assumed public demand, to report the overwhelming political intent voiced as rhetoric to wage war. In part, this pressure and subsequent confusion led the daily press narrative of events to become a false narrative of government reports covering the 12 year period – no WMD was discovered in Iraq. Hence part and parcel of how the situation arose was the hazy distinction in newsworthiness between fictional and journalistic narrative on specific events.

From this unintended or indifferent confusion there are two important lessons. The first lesson is for journalists to check their sources and to be wary of the specific and accurate facts in a narrative and to be careful that a narrative doesn't develop into a new and misleading narrative. The second lesson is for security analysts to seek multiple sources of information and not to rely too heavily on open sources. Journalistic practises should not be acceptable to security analysts that should demand 100 percent precise information especially in the case of justification for war.

Henceforth this article will continue by reconstructing how this situation arose under the headings: press reporting; the error in analysis, the false narrative; and the journalists and the spies.

Press Reporting

The back round of the narrative on WMD and Iraq stretches back to the Iran-Iraq War (1981-1989) when chemical weapon agents were used. During this period Israel also destroyed the Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981 fearing that Iraq was about to attain nuclear weapon capability through its uranium enrichment process. In the aftermath of the first Gulf War (1990-1). UNSCOM uncovered and dismantled a research, development and production infrastructure for biological, toxin and chemical weapons as well as destroying stockpiles of the same in Iraq. An innuendo arose when UNSCOM inspectors informed that much of its work was left unfinished when they were forced to terminate their operations in 1997.[1]

A security analyst could well assume that Iraq at this stage could resume a WMD program given that it had the same regime with the same leader, faced a similar threat environment and might have similar aspirations. Such an assumption could be strengthened with the exposition of a policy against Iraq in the form of President Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech[2] and the subsequent release of Security Strategy (NSS) in 2002. These dictated preemptive war against rogue states that inter-alia flouted United Nations resolutions pertaining to non-proliferation and WMD – Iraq being a prime perpetrator.[3]

Hence the count-down towards war commenced based upon assumed Iraqi WMD. An insight to how a false narrative had been constructed leading to inaccurate security analysis is possible from the Hutton Report (2003) into the suicide of a weapons expert, Dr Kelly. This report highlighted the role of press (BBC), specific reporters (Mr. Gilligan) and certain policymakers (Prime Minister Blair and Secretary of Defense Hoon). The later Lord Butler report (2004) that in part contradicted the Hutton report showed that the intelligence information relied upon by both the press and government was inaccurate.[4]

To be sure Lord Butler indicated that both government and the press used the same sources of information and even had similar methods of analysis. Politicians receiving information from the intelligence agencies and watching the press were convinced that they were receiving information from two different sources. They therefore informed the public and sought to proceed with coercive diplomacy and armed conflict under the assumption that the overall information was accurate that Iraq had WMD. However it appeared that government was quoting the press who in turn were quoting government. In reality there was therefore only one source of information and not two.

How this transpired can be reconstructed by taking the reporting of Iraqi WMD by an established reputable newspaper such as the London based newspaper – *The Telegraph*. [5] Based upon analysis of commercially available American satellite photographs in September 2002, the newspaper disclosed that Saddam had possibly reconstructed three plants that had been used to manufacture biological and chemical weapons that UNSCOM had previously destroyed. The article also reported that satellite photos disclosed secret activities at a uranium production facility at Al-Qaim, 160 miles west of Baghdad. The same story appeared in other morning broadsheets such as The Times, The Independent

and the Guardian as well as the tabloids such as The Sun and The Star. That evening, relying upon the same satellite information, the world-respected BBC informed the public that Prime Minister Tony Blair intended to present a dossier on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to the public and to Parliament the following week. It also reported that Members of Parliament would be recalled from holiday recess to discuss security plans against states rogue to arms control norms. In essence this was not a sensational story nor was it of particular newsworthiness – the story of Iraq WMD had been ongoing for over 20 years.

By the next morning competing 24-hour television news channels had made the sensational claim that inside information, reputedly Downing Street, had stated that the Prime Minister would release a dossier to provide crucial evidence about the need for military action against Iraq. Newspapers, radio and TV were offering analysis and interviews with experts that the dossier would also be a catalyst to force a showdown with ministers who expressed disquiet about the prospect of military intervention; to quell resistance in the Labour Party in particular Robin Cook, the Leader of the House, Clare Short, the International Development Secretary, and Margaret Beckett, the Environment Secretary; to demand that each minister spells out his or her position on Iraq, so that the prime minister could isolate the “doves”; and to provide information about two al-Qa'eda operatives trained in Iraq to assassinate leading Kurds and to build chemical warfare facilities during the 1990s. The public became more intrigued as the press filed story after story quoting Western intelligence estimates that “Saddam Hussein could be months away from developing a nuclear bomb if he could find a source of weapons-grade material”^[6] and that “Saddam had resumed work on trying to enrich uranium”^[7]. Adding to the intrigue the press quoted American intelligence agencies informing they stopped an attempt by Iraq to buy thousands of aluminum tubes for use in centrifuges to enrich uranium which seemed a resurrection of the 1980s political scandal of “Iraqi Super-Gun Affair.”^[8]

All of such reporting was sensational journalism but lacked the essential ingredient for security analysis – tangible evidence. To make the narrative more realistic government thus gave the abstract notion of Iraqi WMD a face when Condoleezza Rice, the American security adviser appeared on television to inform about Iraq: “We do know that he is actively pursuing a nuclear weapon We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.”^[9] Despite the newsworthiness of the narrative it is not clear what Rice's sources of information were, so the press sought Iraqi defectors to inform of eye-witness here-say about Saddam's chemical weapons. To further sustain the story security officials were interviewed in programs such as BBC documentary Panorama about such allegations. Indeed, a senior security official told The New York Times about Iraq and its leader: “The jewel in the crown is nuclear The closer he gets to a nuclear capability, the more credible is his threat to use chemical or biological weapons This made an invasion of Iraq imperative The closer Saddam Hussein gets to a nuclear weapon, the harder he will be to deal with.”^[10]

Henceforth the public was bombarded with news quoting multiple sources making it sufficient for any person in the street to be aware albeit not convinced that Iraq was well on the path to be a threat to local, regional and maybe even global security. There was also substantial media coverage of those opposed to any form of war, those specifically opposed to war against rogue states such as Iraq and those skeptical of actual Iraqi WMD capability including the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The Error in Analysis

A hindsight reading of the narrative on Iraqi WMD shows that each part of the narrative provided little if any evidence to justify war. It is only the sum of the parts that offers the potential danger of WMD. A starting point to consider the error in the security analysis is the publication of two dossiers detailing evidence of Iraq's plans to acquire and deploy chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. The first was in September 2002 and the second in February 2003 – the Iraq war being authorized by Parliament and commencing in March 2003. The press coverage tantalizing the public about “evidence on Iraqi WMD” commenced a few weeks before the first dossier.

To give credibility when presenting the first dossier to the House of Commons the Prime Minister stated on 24 September 2002 “It [the intelligence service] concludes that Iraq has chemical and biological weapons, that Saddam has continued to produce them, that he has existing and active military plans for the use of chemical and biological weapons, which could be activated within 45 minutes, including against his own Shia population; and that he is actively trying to acquire nuclear weapons capability.”^[11]

To demonstrate the errors in security analysis would be to break down such a statement into segments

of intent, capability and assumption. Namely: 1) Intent: "he has existing and active military plans for the use of chemical and biological weapons against his own Shia population, he is actively trying to acquire nuclear weapons capability", 2) Capability: "Iraq has chemical and biological weapons" 3) Assumption: "could be activated within 45 minutes". In part none of the information provided would be of value to justify a war. When each part between comas is combined into a single sentence then a serious security threat is portrayed. Comprehending the error in analysis is highlight that each part of the Prime Ministers statement refers to a different event that arose between 1981-2002. As they were presented in a single sentence in 2002 gave a false impression. Unwittingly the Prime Minister also stated "once the public has seen the evidence people will see this is not something that has been invented or dreamed up in the last few weeks. This is a real and serious issue".^[12] In doing so the scene was set for war to disarm Iraq of WMD but as yet no-one had actually seen the evidence.

On 8 November 2002 a debate took place in the UN Security Council regarding the deteriorating Iraqi situation. This was despite no update of specific information from 1998 to 2002. Namely the sum of the facts presented in the UN debate were of more significance than any of the individual facts. Subsequently UN Security Council Resolution 1441 was approved as a process of deadlines to disarm Saddam Hussein of WMD by armed force. On 18 November 2002 UN weapon inspectors returned to Iraq and on 9 January 2003 Hans Blix the UN chief weapons inspector told the UN Security Council that no smoking gun had been found in Iraq.

The second dossier was presented to the British public in February 2003. When released to the public the impression was given that the dossier was an up-to-date assessment from the Secret Intelligence Services (SIS/MI6). In a foreword to the second dossier, the Prime Minister said that the publication of such secret information was unprecedented. This second dossier claiming to draw on previously secret intelligence material claimed Iraq's attempts to acquire nuclear weapons and to develop long-range missiles capable of hitting Israel or British bases in Cyprus. The dossier detailed how Iraq continued to produce chemical and biological agents and had drawn up plans for their use. It stated that Iraq could have a nuclear weapon one to two years after obtaining the necessary fissile material. The Prime Minister quoted from the dossier when presenting it to the House of Commons "The intelligence is clear: (Saddam) continues to believe his WMD programme is essential both for internal repression and for external aggression. The biological agents we believe Iraq can produce include anthrax, botulinum, toxin, aflatoxin and ricin. All eventually result in excruciatingly painful death."^[13] President Bush welcomed the second dossier stating "I again call for the UN to pass a strong resolution holding this man to account. And if they're unable to do so, the United States and our friends will act."^[14] During the subsequent parliamentary vote it was clear that the narrative and the manner of presentation of both the dossiers with emphasis on certain points was the securing nadir for the cautious backing of MPs for military action to force Saddam Hussein to disarm.

If such statements were to be broken down into segments of intent, capability and assumption then once again none of the information in part would be of value to justify a war. When the parts, or each part between comas are combined into a single sentence then a picture is contrived to provide a portrayal of serious security threat. However, each part between the comas is in reality an event that took place at a different time in a period spanning decades. An explanation of such an error in security analysis could not be made more succinctly than by Boris Johnson, then Conservative MP for Henley, "[Mr Scarlett] was in the position of a foreign editor who has before him a campaigning editor [Mr Campbell]. He's got a story that's not quite hot or strong enough and he agrees to hype it up because he thinks he can get away with it, because he thinks the facts may well turn out to support his editor's desire and because he wants to be obliging"^[15]

The public was skeptical leading to mass rallies. Independent security analysts said both British dossiers lacked a "killer fact" and contained no big surprises. The Iraqi government dismissed the document as "totally baseless", repeating its claim that it no longer had any weapons of mass destruction. Labour Party rebels said it was a "damp squib" and a "PR stunt" and did not provide the justification for all-out war. The press reported all of this as well as the skepticism by MPs from all parties noting that many would back action only if it was sanctioned by a second United Nations Security Council Resolution.^[16] By this stage, however, press no longer had a role to play in conveying the narrative of whether or not Iraq had WMD.^[17] The newsworthy story migrated towards the parliamentary debate on war, during March 2003, and subsequently the war itself. On 20 March 2003, after the UN failed to agree a second resolution, war on Iraq began with American missile strikes and on 2 May 2003 George Bush declared victory. This would have been the end of the story had WMD been discovered in Iraq – but this would not be the case.

The False Narrative

The crises of determining how the error had been made in the security analysis started on 29 May 2003 when the war was all but over – but WMD had not yet been found in Iraq. BBC broadcast journalist Andrew Gilligan reported on the governments September 2002 dossier quoting a senior government source that the dossier had been transformed by No.10 Downing Street against the wishes of the intelligence community. He claimed that caveats had been removed and that information such as the 45-minute activation claim had been “sexed-up”. In other words that the narrative of Iraq WMD had been intentionally created from the sum of its parts. In brief that government had been presenting old, redundant and superfluous information and assumptions on Iraqi WMD capability and intent.

On 10 July 2003 Dr David Kelly was named as the suspected source while government continued to deny the story. On 17 July 2003 Dr Kelly was found dead, apparently a suicide. This forced a focus on the content of Gilligan's story. Downing Street admitted making a serious error in the content of the relevant dossier on Iraq and WMD as it emerged that 10 of the 19 pages of the dossier were copied from a student's PhD thesis (Ibrahim al-Marashi) that related to events around the time of the Gulf War in 1991. This had been published on the Internet in the Israel-based Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA). Clearly it could not be considered as an authoritative source for current considerations on actual Iraq capability. The other main sources in the dossier were articles written in Jane's Intelligence Review by Ken Gause, an intersecurity analyst, and Sean Boyne.^[18] In other words it was true that government had been presenting old, redundant and superfluous information and assumptions on Iraqi WMD capability. However there was no indication of who was to blame for doing so.

The revelations were all the more embarrassing for Downing Street because the dossier had been praised by Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State, in his presentation to the United Nations Security Council in justification of war.^[19] It further emerged that two compilers of the second dossier on Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction were posted to Baghdad from Downing Street only days before Prime Minister Blair announced two parliamentary inquiries into the alleged misuse of intelligence information by the government. Paul Hamill and Naheed Mehta, who could have shed light on the dossier's preparation, were moved from the Communication and Information Centre, a No 10 department located within the Foreign Office, to work as press officers for the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance and the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad.^[20]

Following this were allegations and counter-allegations regarding: 1) the falseness of specific facts in the dossier's content and 2) the falseness of the BBC's source about the falseness of the dossier. The sensationalism came from denials from all sides. Security analysts contested the BBC's stories while the Prime Minister continued to insist, even as late as 4 June 2003 after the end of hostilities and after no WMD had been uncovered, that “There are literally thousands of [WMD] sites.”^[21] Even when presenting evidence on 8 July 2003 to the Commons liaison committee the Prime Minister was adamant that “I don't concede it at all that the intelligence at the time was wrong. I have absolutely no doubt at all that we will find evidence of weapons of mass destruction programs.”^[22]

Controversy raged when former Cabinet Ministers Robin Cook and Clare Short informed a Parliamentary investigating Committee that they were told by the Secret Intelligence Services (SIS/ MI6) in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq that Saddam Hussein did not have any weapons of mass destruction capable of posing a threat to British security. In separate appearances before MPs, the two former Cabinet ministers confirmed that they had each received regular personal briefings from officers of the SIS, who had persuaded them that Saddam Hussein was not a “current and serious” threat. Mr. Cook, who resigned days before war broke out, said his claim that Iraq did not possess “a credible device capable of being delivered against a strategic target had reflected almost word for word a briefing he received from the SIS”.^[23]

Ms. Short also gave MPs a graphic account of the way Mr Blair bypassed the Cabinet, tried to prevent his ministers from receiving SIS briefings and left the decisions on the invasion of Iraq to a small, unelected entourage in his private office. Ms. Short, who walked out of the Cabinet after the war, claiming Mr. Blair had deceived her, said her regular SIS personal briefings had convinced her that Saddam Hussein was dangerous but did not have the capacity to carry out his threat. She said “It's this phrase weapons of mass destruction. When it's used, people think of bombs full of chemical and biological material raining out of the sky. They don't think of scientists and laboratories and experiments. That's where the falsity lies”.^[24]

The Journalists and the Spies

Blame can not be placed solely at the door of the politicians. In a separate investigation in August 2003 Lord Hutton, a retired judge, began six weeks of hearings about the circumstances around Dr Kelly's death. His remit was to focus on the events that may have led to Dr Kelly's death, rather than the wider issue of Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction. Former SIS employee and former chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, John Scarlett, gave evidence. Private e-mails and memos, minutes of private meetings, even extracts from Alastair Campbell's private journals (then director of communications at Downing Street and a former journalist) were all made available to Hutton. In January 2004, the Hutton report ruled that Dr Kelly committed suicide and cleared the government over the 45 minutes claim. Mr. Gilligan's (The BBC journalist) claim Downing Street had "sexed-up" the case against Saddam Hussein in its September 2002 dossier – inserting information it "probably knew" to be wrong – was dismissed out of hand. The government – and the Prime Minister – were cleared of any wrong doing.

However it later emerged that a month prior to the Hutton enquiry, in July 2003, that the SIS had withdrawn intelligence that helped support the September 2002 dossier allegedly without the knowledge of senior security formulators including the Prime Minister. Hence the Prime Minister's evidence to the Hutton Inquiry was technically inaccurate.[\[25\]](#)

This was not the end of the story. American President George W Bush ordered an inquiry into alleged intelligence failings in the run-up to the Iraq war (2003) – given that no WMD had been found. Prime Minister Tony Blair followed suit. On 3 February 2004 ex-civil service head Lord Butler was given the remit to lead inquiry where his report, published on Wednesday 14 July 2004, highlighted failings in British intelligence and governmental procedures.[\[26\]](#) The core of the report was its painstaking investigation why so many experienced people misjudged the quality of, and drew erroneous conclusions from, a limited number of sources; and failed in early 2003, in the light of the already apparent inconsistency between these conclusions and the findings, or non-findings, of the weapon inspectors, to look again at the intelligence material and subject it to re-validation. Butler found that it was the failure of intelligence which was the reason for the failure of the policy and which left the British Government in a situation it had almost certainly hoped to avoid, namely having to decide whether to support the Americans militarily without wider international backing, or whether to stand aside at the last minute and let them take action on their own.[\[27\]](#)

Lord Butler's report sent journalists and politicians scurrying back to Lord Hutton's report into Dr Kelly's death. The BBC director general confirmed that Andrew Gilligan the BBC reporter, had claimed based upon his interviews with Dr Kelly that there was "ample evidence" the government had "sexed up" the Iraq dossier and that caveats were removed and certain things were given more weight than they could bear. Lord Hutton had said that the key claims in Mr Gilligan's story were "unfounded" and cleared the government of "sexing up" the dossier. However, Lord Butler's report essentially found both Dr Kelley and the BBC to be accurate in that caveats had been removed from the dossier and that the claims Iraq could activate WMD in 45 minutes were not substantiated. So Lord Hutton found the BBC to be incorrect about its allegations that the information was incorrect and incorrect on who had 'sexed-up the dossier while Lord Butler found the BBC to be correct about its allegations that the information was incorrect but incorrect that the blame lay at Downing Street. The ensuing question was – Had anyone intentionally created a false narrative out of the sum of its parts? Lord Butler pointed a finger at the intelligence agencies but did not state whether this was at the best of anyone or by their own initiative[\[28\]](#) Skeptic's to both the Hutton and the Butler reports tend to quote Foreign Secretary Jack Straw who gave evidence to a Parliamentary inquiry six months before the Butler report and which tend to contradict some of the Butler findings placing blame on Alistair Campbell. Jack Straw singled him out as the driving force behind the dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.[\[29\]](#) Both Hutton and Butler chose not to include this evidence in their reports!

The truth might never be known since the Butler report revealed that minutes were not taken of the many government meetings. In hindsight maybe the journalist accounts have become the crucial recorder of history – whether accurately or not may never be known. The end of the episode when came the Prime Minister, on 6 July 2004, in giving evidence to the Commons Liaison Committee stated "I have to accept we haven't found them (WMD) and we may never find them. We don't know what has happened to them. They could have been removed. They could have been hidden. They could have been destroyed."[\[30\]](#) In response to the Butler Report the Prime Minister, in a statement on 14 July 2004 admitted, "We expected, I expected to find actual usable, chemical or biological weapons after we entered Iraq. But I have to accept, as the months have passed, it seems increasingly clear that at the time of invasion, Saddam did not have stockpiles of chemical or biological weapons ready to

deploy.”^[31] The final word must rest with Peter Mandelson the former Cabinet minister who stated “Thank goodness we live in a country where these matters are determined on the basis of fact, on the basis of judgments rather than on the basis of media show trials and kangaroo courts which, if it were otherwise, would be like living in a reverse police state.”^[32]

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the end of the narrative given that Blair admitted that no WMD was found in Iraq there remains relevance in contemplating the role of specific individuals in the security analysis. These individuals have been revealed as the journalist (Andrew Gilligan), the former journalist cum adviser to the Prime Minister (Alistair Campbell), the scientist (Dr Kelly) and the spy (John Scarlett). Indeed, the various inquiries show that these individuals were responsible for having compiled, provided, presented and/or critiqued the evidence or lack thereof of Iraqi WMD. There is no evidence to suggest that these individuals were implicated in creating or fabricating facts. However and essential in security matters it is not always the narrative but always the analysis that is crucial especially for public opinion, for parliamentary debate, for United Nations Security Council Resolutions and indeed the decision to wage war. There was clearly a failure of analysts and of the political elite to differentiate between each fact in the narrative of Iraq WMD over a period of decades and a new narrative constructed out of the sum of its parts. This is truly applicable as the world faces a decision on what to do with WMD in Iran.

Clearly decades of innuendo of Iraqi WMD and a political rhetoric for war construed a new misleading time-compressed narrative comprising many small narratives each accurate in its own right but not accurate for security decision making purposes. The press was a conduit of information but this proved to be fatal – the press quoted politicians who quoted the press leading to the construction of the misleading narrative. There was a failure by journalists to read their own previous stories, seek new evidence and to refrain from quoting those who had quoted news stories. This constitutes the first lesson – the lesson for journalists to be wary of the specific and accurate facts in a narrative and to be cautious that a new and misleading narrative does not develop especially when a story unfolds over a period of decades. Even though the press was a conduit of information there is no evidence to suggest that government controlled the media or that the media swayed government. Throughout the entire process the most skeptical entity was the public. To be sure there would seem to be substantial evidence of the press as an arbiter of security – as an agent of power rather than a wielder of power.

Herein lies the second lesson – the lesson for security analysts and decision-makers to seek multiple sources of intelligence not relying too much on open sources. Such a lesson is evident from this article that has shown how problematic it is for journalists, pressured by their editors and assumed public demand, to distinguish the hazy distinction in newsworthiness between fictional and journalistic narrative. The journalist needs to consider a range of combinations on a sliding scale of ensuring 100% accuracy or a sensational story that might contain rumours when pandering to the demand of populace. Such haziness is acceptable to journalism and to the public. However such haziness should not permeate into the compilation and presentation of intelligence dossiers to security decision makers. When it does as in the case of Iraq and WMD then it is of no surprise both the press and security decision makers have lost considerable credibility.

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